

MEDIEVAL VALUES¹

THE period in the life of the Church during which one and the same tradition flourished throughout the Christian world, in East and West alike, is generally supposed to be the first five centuries, or, in other words, the period before and up to the medieval. The Middle Ages, and especially what may be called the Latin Middle Ages, are either discounted altogether or else mentioned only in order to eliminate them from the field of investigation; three charges in particular being levelled against them.

To begin with, the Middle Ages in the West are held to have been juridical and institutional, fenced about by an intricate system of legislation; they were the Golden Age of Canon Law and thus opposed to the spontaneous developments characterising the Eastern Church over the same period of time. The medieval West was also marked by moral and psychological trends of thought in contrast with the mysticism of Eastern Christianity, and religious life tended to be more practical than contemplative in spirit. The immediate present and its concerns bulked larger than the disinterested pursuit of eternal life, and the temporal preponderated over the eschatological in importance. There is, moreover, a notice-

¹ From the French of Dom Jean Leclercq. A monk of Clervaux and one of France's leading authorities in matters medieval, he has already published important works on the ecclesiology of John of Paris, on the spirituality of Petrus Cellensis, on John of Fécamp and on Peter the Venerable, as well as numerous articles in reviews, having now in preparation a book on St Bernard and a critical edition of the Letters of Ivo of Chartres. The field in which he pursues his researches is very similar to the one tilld so fruitfully in the past by Dom Wilmart, but his approach is rather different from that of his well-known predecessor. Although by no means incapable or impatient of the minutiae of erudition, his works abound in general ideas, such as do undeniably exist but need looking for in the exhaustive contributions of Dom Wilmart to medieval studies.
m'intéressent.

The pages which follow are an adaptation rather than a literal translation of a notable article which he published in volume 19 (1946) of *Irénikon* propounding his theory of the two parallel (not successive) trends in medieval religious literature. Its main ideas were lately discussed at length with the present writer in the course of work pursued in common and full permission was given for the adaptation: an English version of the text being made by Miss G. M. Durnford.

Even with his careful provisos some may not agree with all that Dom Leclercq has to say—in the opinion of the present writer the dominating figures of both the scholastic and the monastic worlds have the greatest things in common—yet his main contention is sound: that both trends co-exist, and that to recognise this fact is to be provided with a key to the understanding of the spiritual writers of the Middle Ages. Such a key seems to be particularly desirable now that many of the lesser-known religious works, both of the early Eastern Church and of the medieval West, are being happily brought to light and put at our disposal in various series of texts and translations. The few references to books and the footnotes in these pages are peculiar to the English version.

ably psychological bent in the writings of the men most representative of the centuries in question; to quote examples from either extremity of the period, we find St Gregory the Great pre-eminently the moralist of Scriptural exegesis, and St Bernard's conscious fervour far removed from the ancient spirituality of the *Charisma*. Finally, the Middle Ages of the West follow closely in the footsteps of St Augustine, and even then not so much St Augustine the theologian as the logician and philosopher, seeking inspiration in Platonic and, later, Aristotelian systems rather than in the liturgy, the Fathers, and the spiritual interpretation of holy Scripture.

For all these reasons the medieval epoch in the West is looked upon as making a break in integral Christian tradition.

The deduction is logical enough if the presupposition be sound. But is it? Can we calmly accept the fact that the greater part of the Church's history represents a breach or a deviation? Were there only five privileged centuries and fifteen centuries of decline? Here is a problem which must be faced and challenged to yield a solution. If it can be established that at least up to the thirteenth century the West did in fact remain in contact with the older and most universal traditions, then the duration of the 'breach' is already considerably reduced. It may not be superfluous in this connection to draw attention to certain hitherto unrecognised aspects of this portion of the Middle Ages.

It would appear that we may rightly distinguish two Middle Ages in the West, always providing that we avoid seeing them as two successive chronological epochs, early and late, implying something inferior in the second one. The two Middle Ages of which we are speaking co-existed from about the eighth to the twelfth century. They may well be compared to parallel lines never quite meeting, cross-currents that touch and mingle for a time or react on one another but none the less remain distinct, and all along correspond to the twofold activity in the Church represented by monks and clerks.

The clerical medieval world draws its inspiration from the episcopal schools and subsists on their culture. It is of 'scholar' origin and its intellectual movements grow normally and almost inevitably into that 'scholasticism' which reached its full flowering in the thirteenth century, notably in the University of Paris. And this is what is popularly mistaken for the whole of the medieval West. On the juridical side it is shown in the sustained efforts of the hierarchy and the compilers of Canon Law to assure to the Church an independent, stable, political status and give her a complete organisation in matters temporal. On the moral side it

will give rise to systematised casuistry; in the field of thought its master is St Augustine: the psychological theory of the Trinity, the metaphysical or scientific developments perceptible especially in his earlier works; these exercise a profound influence over the philosophical and theological mind of the Paris doctors.

It need scarcely be said that these generalisations are too summary. If, in the late thirteenth-century *Quodlibetales*, St Augustine is unquestionably the authority most invoked, the Greek Fathers are not, on that account, forgotten: the importance they accord to St John Damascene is well known, to quote but a single instance. Several recent works on the sources of St Thomas and the use he makes of his authorities betray how much his writings owe to conceptions highly traditional; his patristic learning was very much greater than has often been supposed. The sayings reported by his biographers that he would gladly give the whole city of Paris for the power to consult St John Chrysostom's Commentary on St Matthew is symptomatic in this connection and we know, too, the daily use he made of Cassian's Conferences and the Lives of the Desert Fathers. The more the scholastic thirteenth century is studied, the richer and more complete it appears.

The fact remains, however, that vast and varied as are the textual sources drawn upon by the scholastic Middle Ages, they bear an entirely different intellectual stamp from that borne by monastic thought over the same period. Save on the personal plane, monachism had no intercourse with the scholastic world, and the spiritual activity that grew out of the soil of the cloister approximated more to the Eastern Church than to the mind which blossomed into the great urban scholars of the West. The religious life of the medieval Benedictine abbeys as it reflects the development of the Latin West is nearer than is generally supposed to that led in the East at the same time, and this because both were the immediate and direct prolongation of a tradition older than the Schism. The monastic Middle Ages were themselves diverse in character: in one and the same century, the ninth, the commentaries of Alcuin and Hraban Maur differ widely although (even supposing Alcuin was not a Benedictine) both men lived under the aegis of the monasteries, while several pseudo-Haymos interpreted Scripture in works, whether published or still in manuscript, very various in style, and the same is true of the pseudo-Bedes. Hitherto these authors have not been studied: when they have by chance attracted attention, it is only as throwing light on critical or documentary questions: attempts have been made to date or place or identify them rather than to examine the spiritual milieu to which they belong and on which they can enlighten us.

In this respect the medievalists of the future have still a rich harvest to glean. The tracing of the history of culture and the spiritual life the history of human thought and prayer, in a word the history of men has not so far evoked any effort comparable to that expended on clearing up problems connected with facts, texts, and, lately, doctrines. Henceforward it would appear that the monastic under-current flowing throughout the entire medieval period is only a continuation of the older patristic current.

The continuance throughout the monastic Middle Ages of many elements bound up with Eastern tradition is easy to verify from sources covering the whole range of monastic spirituality. The very words employed are revealing in this connection. Not just one singled out nor the most famous necessarily, nor the most widely read, nor the most influential in succeeding generations, but many in all these categories use words borrowed from the Greek Fathers; words like *theoria*, *vita theoretica*, *philosophus* and *philosophia*, *theologus* and *theologia*. And what is so remarkable is that they attach the same sense to them as the Eastern mystics did. Down to the end of the twelfth century, for instance, the term *theologia*, instead of connoting a scientifically intellectual exercise, was understood as the state of the soul in prayer, her contemplation of the divine mysteries reflected in wonderment and praise.

The same fidelity to the Greek and Latin Fathers is characteristic of medieval religious learning, or, if preferred, the study of theology in the modern sense of the term, provided always it is borne in mind that in the case of the monks the term 'theology' included an inner experience, an attitude of the soul implying and drawing upon all the Church's well-springs of contemplation: liturgical, exegetical and devotional. And what is the raw material, the theme *par excellence* on which this sublime activity is exercised? Everything that throws light on the glory of God and the triumph of Christ. Firstly, the whole of Christology is centred on the scenes of the Redeemer's victory: the resurrection, the ascension, envisaged as 'mysteries' quite as much as historical events. Secondly, Mariology flows from the divine Motherhood of the Virgin and is interwoven with the bond uniting the person of Mary to the person and work of Christ: it lingers less willingly on the psychological and human privileges of the Mother of God. Thirdly, a feature of Angelology is that, however highly developed, it too remains sober and balanced, neither deviating into a superstitious demonology on the one hand nor into a too self-regarding devotion to the Angel Guardians on the other. To sum up: the entire life of man, the entire life of the Church is eschatological in attitude and outlook: human existence and all its manifestations are meaningless save in relation

to the heavenly realities which they forecast.

There is such a thing then as monastic theology, which brooded over the great traditional ideas, and preferred these to corollaries. Peter the Venerable wrote two long treatises, only two, on the life of our Lord; not didactic expositions, but dogmatic in inspiration and lyrical in manner, the one dealing with the Transfiguration, the other with the Resurrection. (P.L. 189, 953.) They are at once so solid and so poetic, these splendid texts, they make one feel one is reading some of the great *Catecheses* of Cyril of Jerusalem or Gregory Nazianzen: among the Latin Fathers they suggest Leo the Great or Zeno rather than Augustine. And when, at the very end of the twelfth century, Baldwin of Canterbury, the Cistercian, set out to write on the Eucharist, his work took the form of a commentary on holy Scriptures (P.L. 204), the texts he dwells on being mainly borrowed either from the Old Testament or from Biblical passages embodied in the Roman Canon of the Mass, and thus by means of a sound spiritual exegesis, Christological but not concerned with moralising, he makes the Old and New Testaments throw light on one another. Origen is quoted several times, philosophical speculation is avoided, and he devotes a brief excursus only at the end of his treatise to those questions concerning substance and accidents which had so specially exercised the schoolmen since Berengarius. Taken as a whole, his work lays emphasis on Sacrifice and Communion as the well-springs of eternal life: the Sacrifice of the Body of Christ is the effectual commemoration of the Easter mystery, the fulfilment of the Pasch and other ancient types, the prophetic pledge of beatitude.

In the spiritual field ascetic practice equally with mystic theory keeps an Eastern flavour. As regards the first it will suffice to recall that twelfth-century Cluny practised the *metaniae* (or, 'satisfactions') of the Egyptian deserts: both the word and the thing had been retained (P.L. 189, 1027.). As for the great ideas underlying the mystical life, they were such as abound in the Sayings of the Fathers and in Gregory of Nyssa. The same fundamental realities and the same essential experiences are reflected in identical formulas, often presented in a like paradoxical guise: 'sober drunkenness', 'watchful sleep', belong as truly to John of Fécamp or Arnold of Bonneval as they do to Basil or the pseudo-Dionysius. If, some day, its history in medieval monachism is traced, the phrase *via regia* and others of the same mystic significance will help to establish and confirm a glorious continuity between the great doctors of the East and those who succeeded them in the Latin Church. Not that we must expect to find absolute identity

of outlook; the ideas are living and being alive they evolve, but they are fundamentally the same. The *puritas* upon which the monks of the twelfth century are so fond of dwelling approximates closely to the patristic *catharsis*, and Ivo of Chartres's advice to eleventh-century virgins is curiously reminiscent of Methodius's *Banquet*.

It would be easy to multiply examples; the important thing is to pick out such as go to prove the solid unity persisting between Western monachism and the Christian East; a unity concerned with looking at man's life on earth primarily as an anticipation; his whole soul stretched out towards the glorious return of Christ, the full restoration of the universe and of humanity, his only worthwhile pursuit here below to begin to lead the very life which will be his in a happy eternity. The monastic ideal is thus essentially contemplative. While the Church's men of action, her clerks educated in city schools, make laudable attempts to inoculate temporal institutions with Christianity and in so doing set up a form of humanism which can be regarded as belonging to this world, the monks, on the other hand, are cultivating what is really a humanism not of this world. Their renunciation of what is transient has been mistaken by some historians for anti-humanism, but it would be folly to see in it utter indifference to real life: witness their achievements in the economic field. But they were always looking to a divine future, waiting for a Man to come, for the Son of God to come to judge the living and the dead and restore God's paradise. All monkish asceticism takes its meaning from this other-worldliness: their withdrawal from earthly concerns, their small taste for the exercise of pastoral functions, even when they had been raised to the priesthood.

It would not be difficult further to extend the scope of these suggestions. Suffice it to remember all that the sculpture in the great abbey churches owes to ancient iconography, while romanesque frescoes in the humblest of priories are reminiscent of the mosaics of Ravenna and Sancta Sophia. Monastic exegesis is a subject deserving of thorough investigation: not merely as regards method but in their choice of texts too, the Benedictines would appear to be in the line of succession to the earliest Fathers. Did they not, in writings for the most part anonymous or unpublished, repeatedly expound the mystic significance of the Tabernacle of Moses and the High Priest's vesture with precisely the same zest as Clement of Alexandria? When the whole history of the commentaries on the Canticle right from Origen to Thomas Gallus becomes known, is it not likely to afford fresh proof of the close relationship uniting the spiritual spokesmen of Western monasticism with those of

Greek antiquity? One can but hazard a prophecy. For in all these regions as yet unexplored a trail remains to be blazed.

It would be foolhardy to wish to explain the coincidences between the East and the monastic Middle Ages until each has been duly verified and submitted to detailed study: the most that can be done at the present stage of research is to weigh probabilities and allege reasons. Everything that continued to be possessed in common between Western monachism and Byzantine tradition did in fact so continue because on both sides contact was maintained with the same sources. Certain of these sources can even now be pointed out with no risk of error, primarily, of course, the Bible. The same texts have been read, and read in the same way, since the psychology of *lectio divina*—so different from that of the Schoolmen's *quaestio*—is very like that revealed by the spiritual commentaries of the Fathers. In the scholastic sphere the Bible was looked to to supply arguments that could be introduced into doctrinal disputations; the literal exegesis was everything. In the cloister, on the contrary, men searched the scriptures simply to discover food for contemplation such as would support the soul's life: free rein was given therefore to allegorical interpretation, although objective criticism was not despised as the occupation of those with aptitude for it. Origen had in his day employed both methods, though his commentaries on Exodus or the Canticle are the books of his one would turn to for inspiration rather than the *Hexapla*.

Inseparable from the Bible were the Fathers' expositions of it which were constantly studied and transcribed. The Greek members among them claimed some degree of attention; translations, not very numerous, perhaps, but well selected and of first rate quality, were conscientiously made and widely disseminated. St Basil's *Hexameron*, for instance, became known through Eustathius's translation of it, a work so accurate that it is still one of the best authorities for the original text. Catalogues, and works like that of N. R. Ker on *The Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, prove that throughout that period manuscripts of Athanasius, Basil, Clement of Alexandria, Dionysius the Areopagite, Ephraem, Eusebius of Caesaria, Gregory Nazianzen, Hegesippus, Hesychius, Irenaeus, St John Chrysostom, Origen and Sozomen were in existence in monastic libraries and that some among them were often copied. Numbers of texts of Greek or Syriac origin have only survived in Latin manuscripts, some of them dating from the twelfth century, like those known as the Latin Origen, the Latin Chrysostom, the Gallican Eusebius, each pseudonym denoting several

anonymous authors whose works have never yet been studied, still less edited with the care they deserve.

It is the case with some of the Fathers that certain elements borrowed from classical philosophy or from Jewish thought, from Plotinus or from one of the stoics and from Philo of Alexandria were called upon to enrich the interpretation of the great Bible subjects, and a portion of this material descended to the Middle Ages. It would be wrong to over-emphasise the importance of the Greek Fathers' contribution in this connection, yet there are certain facts that cannot be challenged: William of St Thierry quotes Origen fifty times and Gregory of Nyssa thirty,² whereas Gilson has pointed out that St Bernard also owes something to Origen.³ St Gregory the Great, too, the father of all the monastic spiritual literature of the Middle Ages, the Gregory of the *Moralia* or Ezekiel rather than he of the better-known Homilies or Dialogues, this Gregory did not spend several years in Constantinople without being influenced thereby. Were other writers made the subject of studies as minute as those which have been devoted to, say, William of St Thierry, we would be forced to draw analogous conclusions, and this is something to be taken into consideration.

The main road down which the treasures of antiquity travelled to the monastic Middle Ages would seem to have been the Liturgy. Assuredly in every church, and first of all in the Cathedrals under whose walls the Schools were built, the same ceremonies were carried out, the same texts sung. Yet the life of the monks was perforce much more deeply permeated by them. This helps us to realise why soteriological and eschatological themes remained the staple food of monastic contemplation and see how it was that when a point of doctrine such as the Real Presence or the legitimacy of prayers for the dead was called in question the argument instinctively cited was liturgical custom: the practice of great monasteries like Cluny served as the accepted basis for discussion; to discover what that practice was preceded speculation and paved the way to considering the data of the particular dogma under discussion. The need of interpreting the liturgy as well as the Bible was generally admitted, and of interpreting it in the same way.

Finally, the part played by living tradition in this continuity linking Western monachism to the Church's past, must not be misunderstood or minimised. It is often asserted that the monks preserved the tradition through copying, reading and expounding

² J.-M. Déchanet, *Guillaume de Saint-Thierry* (Bruges, 1942), pp. 206-7.

³ *La Théologie mystique de Saint Bernard* (Paris, 1934), pp. 27, 45.

the works of the Fathers, and this is certainly true; but it was also kept through living what the Fathers wrote, or 'transmission by experience', as it may be called.

At a time when men were in danger of losing intellectual balance amid the niceties of problems really subsidiary, the abbeys remained the storehouse as it were of the great Christian ideas; owing to the daily observance of the Office and to assiduous meditation on the Fathers of the Church, contact was kept with the sources of doctrine. Thanks to oral teaching and to the examples handed down through generations right from the earliest anchorites, the precious heritage received from those spiritual giants who were the fathers of monachism was preserved intact. Interchange and intercourse between the East on the one hand and Italy, Gaul, Germany and Spain on the other had never ceased: Cassian brought back word to Marseilles of what he had seen in Egypt; St Martin had travelled through the Empire before he founded Ligugé; St Benedict was versed in the Fathers and makes much of St Basil; St Gregory the Great had frequented the spiritual circles of Constantinople. In Carolingian times and at the time of the Crusades, in the intervals favourable to Holy Land pilgrimage, a close communion of ideas, aspirations and religious experiences was established. From Tabennisi to Cluny, from St Anthony to Peter the Venerable there had been no break, no interruption.

This transmission, living and in harmony with the laws of life, had allowed of the Western monks' assimilating many of the elements which constituted the strength of their Eastern brothers. It also made it possible for them to leave behind, or let drop, certain elements in the Western past less suitable for assimilation. While some saw in St Augustine's Confessions an arsenal for the manufacture of metaphysical proofs, the masters of the spiritual life looked on them only as a mystic's testimony. They distilled the essence of his outpourings from all the philosophic matter surrounding them: valuable as this was, it was foreign to Augustine's prayer. His polemic regarding the Manichees or Neo-Platonists had neither meaning nor appeal for the monks of the tenth or eleventh centuries; they therefore lost no time over them. Through St Gregory, John of Fécamp and the monkish generation who lived upon their writings, Augustine's teaching became so to speak sifted: the form in which it fascinated the thirteenth century schoolmen was very different from that in which the monastic writers had clothed it.

These few observations are sufficient to authorise us in drawing two types of conclusions, speculative and practical. The first con-

cerns a judgment to be passed on the Middle Ages, and it must be a judgment finely weighed, completely balanced. The medieval period is not a simple entity, it is two things, two at least. And the monastic Middle Ages, profoundly Western and Latin as they are, approximate more nearly to the East than do the scholastic Middle Ages flourishing at the same time and on the same soil. There is here no question of denying that the scholastic stream of tendency stands for a legitimate evolution, a real advancement in Christian thought, nor would we minimise the grave divergencies which separate Western and Eastern monks. It may even happen that closer examination will reveal that the resemblances between them are scarcely more than apparent and superficial compared with the underlying differences. But these resemblances do exist, and they have been too long overlooked. It would be dangerous indeed to be carried away by the charms of their similarity: that would be to fall into an easy but baseless and premature notion of what their union constituted. There are substantial differences between the monastic Middle Ages and the Christian East: even granted that men had the same thoughts on either side, they were filtered through very diverse temperaments. On the other hand, even in the West, the difference separating the monastic from the scholastic world consists not so much in the doctrines themselves as in a mode of thought. Among the Easterns, too, it must be remembered that differences existed; either on the psychological side, for Ephraem does not think like Chrysostom, nor the Syrians like the Greeks; or as to immediate concerns such as those which put Antioch and Alexandria in opposition to each other. But differences of that kind do not exclude fundamental agreement.

To determine just how far it is impossible to find a common denominator the West must be studied as the East has been. To know the West better will be to appreciate her more, if the matter is honestly faced. The Western Middle Ages are a solid fact commanding respect. They embody truths which it is our plain duty to approach with sympathy and in an objective spirit. Historical data are too often simplified to an absurd extent, and a far-off past telescoped into all that is prior to the spiritual generation to which the historian belongs; an idea of the Middle Ages is fostered which they themselves would most certainly have repudiated as unrecognisable. Knowledge and love of the medieval West is thus beneficial for the admirers of the East and of antiquity as well as for everyone who is well assured that the history of the Church is not one of decline and fall.

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